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ABSTRACT

A survey of presidents of 21 local chapters of the California Association of Neurologically Handicapped Children--Association for Children with Learning Disabilities was conducted to investigate improvements in attitudes during the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP), the positive changes brought about by IYDP community activities, and actions which should be taken to build on the positive effects of community activities. Participants were administered a specially designed instrument, Attitudes Towards Learning Disabilities Survey. Among findings were that positive changes in attitudes were noted toward persons with learning disabilities as well as in the persons themselves, positive changes were attributed only in part to the effects of community activities in carrying out the theme of IYDP, and recommended actions included talks and demonstrations at meetings of community groups. A copy of the survey instrument is appended. (SB)

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Improvements in Attitudes Toward Learning Disabilities During the International Year of Disabled Persons

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Running head: Attitudes Toward Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

As the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) was drawing to a close, the preliminary results of a survey of presidents of local chapters of the California Association for Neurologically Handicapped Children--ACLD revealed improvements in several indicators of attitudes toward learning disability in their communities, particularly in awareness of learning disability as a fact of life. Little improvement was noted in employment. Improvements were also noted in several indicators of attitudes held by persons with learning disabilities, particularly in awareness of their own abilities and willingness to keep trying and competing. No improvement was noted in self-confidence. Community activities in carrying out the IYDP theme were judged to have contributed somewhat to permanent, positive improvements in attitudes. Recommended actions for building on these positive effects included talks and demonstrations at meetings of community groups; one person talking with one other person at a time; formation of Young Adult Learning Disability groups; work with local schools; newspaper-radio-TV coverage; and more emphasis on trained teachers, tutors, and courses for adults with learning disabilities.

Improvements in Attitudes Towards Learning Disabilities
During the International Year of Disabled Persons

During 1981, the idea of disability received a lot of attention. In his proclamation on the International Year of Disabled Persons, President Reagan said "Today there are 35 million disabled Americans who represent one of our most underutilized national resources." The Parents' Campaign for Handicapped Children and Youth called for us "to face honestly the deep-rooted attitudes in each of us that continue to assign disabled people a lower level of expectation in our society." Richard Ferris, president of United Air Lines, commented "You could join the disabled minority." Debra Cornelius of the Regional Rehabilitation Research Institute on Attitudinal, Legal and Leisure Barriers stated "negative attitudes are the single most important barrier to full integration of disabled people in society." As chairperson of the Committee of Disabled Employees of the California State Department of Education, I encouraged business leaders to consider starting their own advisory committees of their own disabled employees.

Learning disability is a fact of life for millions of Americans. Learning disability, in the words of the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped, "Is Not Just a Problem Children Outgrow." Positive, realistic attitudes are essential to overcoming the effects of learning disability on persons with learning disabilities and on their families. Public knowledge and positive attitudes toward learning disability have been developing in the past twenty years, due in large part to the unremitting work of parents, professionals, and now young adults, in organizations such as ACLD.

The International Year of the Disabled Persons (IYDP), now drawing to a close, provided a unique opportunity to study attitude changes toward learning disability in California. As recognized by the United Nations, the President of the United States of America, state and local leaders, and national organizations such as ACLD, an international association for children and adults with learning disabilities, the theme of the IYDP is "Toward Full Participation in the Life of the Community and the Nation."

All over the country, community partnerships were to have been strengthened or created, to plan and carry out community activities which would have an enduring effect, one which would last beyond the year. Little is known about the effects of such activities on attitudes toward learning disability.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine three questions: 1. Have improvements in attitude occurred during the IYDP? 2. Have community activities to carry out the theme of the IYDP contributed to positive changes in attitudes toward learning disabilities? 3. What actions should be taken to build on the positive effects of these community activities?

Method

Data were collected in February 1982 by surveying a panel of judges: The judges were the presidents of local chapters of CANHC-ACLD, the California Association for Neurologically Handicapped Children--Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities. Organized by parents of children with learning disabilities several years before the ACLD was

begun, CANHC affiliated with ACLD in the early 1970's. At the time of this study there were 21 local chapters of CANHC-ACLD throughout California, whose membership included parents and professionals. Each chapter was active in its community on behalf of children and young adults with learning disabilities.

The study was a cooperative effort between the author and CANHC-ACLD. The author designed the survey form, analyzed and interpreted the data, and prepared the final report. The state office of CANHC-ACLD distributed and collected the survey forms and encouraged the participation of the presidents of the local chapters as judges in this exploratory effort.

The data collection instrument, "Attitudes Towards Learning Disabilities Survey," was designed in January, 1982, specifically for this study. In making their judgments and in completing the two-page survey form, the chapter presidents were asked to consider the events over the past year in the geographical territory covered by their CANHC-ACLD chapters, to recall that the IYDP was drawing to a close, and to note that the theme of the IYDP was "Toward Full Participation in the Life of the Community and Nation."

The survey contained four multiple-choice judgment items. The four items contained a total of sixteen sub-questions, to which the response choices were "Yes," "No," and "Not Sure." Item One covered changes in five indicators of attitude toward persons with learning disabilities. Item Two covered changes in five indicators of attitude held by persons with learning disabilities. Item Three asked for an overall judgment on the contribution of community IYDP activities to changes in attitudes. Item Four covered five kinds of actions which could be taken to build on the positive effects of community activities. In a field-test, the average time for completion of the survey form was found to be fifteen minutes (See Appendix A for the instrument).

Results

By the time of preparation of this preliminary report, completed survey forms had been received from presidents of five of the local chapters of CANHC-ACLD. The geographical areas represented by these chapters included a major portion of the residents of California, for example, the San Francisco peninsula, Los Angeles, and Riverside.

Improvements in indicators of attitude

In the judgment of these CANHC-ACLD chapter presidents, one indicator of attitudes in their communities toward persons with learning disabilities was more favorable as the IYDP was drawing to a close: "awareness of learning disability as a fact of life." Three indicators were judged as improved in some communities but unchanged in others: "more acceptance as peers, equals, or competitors," "less resentment of apparent special treatment," and "more willingness to include persons with learning disabilities in social, educational, athletic, or arts activities." One indicator was judged as not having improved in most communities: "more willingness to considering hiring as paid workers."

Two indicators of attitude held by persons with learning disabilities were judged as more favorable as the IYDP was drawing to a close: "more awareness of their own abilities" and "more willingness to keep trying, competing." Two indicators received mixed judgments: "more pride in their own accomplishments" and "more knowledge of ways they can cope." One indicator was judged as not having improved:

"more self-confidence."

Contributions of community activities in carrying out the IYDP theme

CANHC-ACLD chapter presidents gave mixed reviews to the contributions of community IYDP activities toward permanent, positive changes in attitudes toward learning disabilities, and persons with learning disabilities. There were positive effects in some communities and no effects in others.

Recommended actions for building on the positive effects of community activities

Four actions were recommended by all chapter presidents: "talks and demonstrations at community group meetings," "one person talking with one other person at a time," "formation of young learning disability adult groups," "work with local schools." "Newspaper, radio, TV coverage" was recommended by all but one chapter president. One chapter president recommended "have more trained personnel such as teachers, tutors, and courses available to help learning disabled adults."

Discussion

In this exploratory study, the responses of the CANHC-ACLD

chapter presidents in California show that in their communities, positive changes in certain indicators of attitudes toward learning disabilities have taken place over the past year (1981). The positive changes in attitude were noted toward persons with learning disabilities as well as in the persons themselves. However, little or no improvement was judged to have occurred in several key indicators of attitude such as "willingness to hire as paid workers" and "more self-confidence." The positive changes were attributed only in part to the effects of community activities in carrying out the theme of the "International Year of Disabled Persons, Toward Full Participation in the Life of the Community and the Nation." Finally, the chapter presidents recommended ways to build on the positive effects of community activities.

The results of this study represent current findings on changes in attitudes toward learning disabilities in several communities in one state in a country of fifty states. These findings should be examined for their applicability to other communities, states, and areas of the country, particularly as a national consensus may be growing to proclaim 1982 as the National Year of the Disabled Person. The ideas offered for

building on the positive effects of community IYDP activities should be reviewed by the leaders of other groups, such as the Council for Exceptional Children, in each community.

The reported lack of positive effect in some communities should be explored to ascertain the possible reasons and to improve the community activities. Several questions arise from this finding, such as "Were the community activities counter-productive?" "Did the activities disregard learning disabilities?" "Were persons with learning disabilities consulted in the planning and execution of the activities?" (Or, as has occurred to me as I hear from persons across the country, are there states and communities in which the letters IYDP might well stand for "Invisible Year of the Disabled Person"?)

The notion of cooperative research efforts with organizations of concerned and knowledgeable parents should be explored by researchers. Finally, the concept of "attitude toward learning disabilities" should be the focus of more intensive research efforts, particularly in the young adult population and in employers.

Footnote

The paper has been presented at the 1982 International Conference of ACLD, March 3-6, in Chicago, Illinois. The study was conducted in cooperation with CANHC-ACLD, the California Association for Neurologically Handicapped Children, the state affiliate of ACLD, Inc., an association for children and adults with learning disabilities.

Requests for reprints of this paper and correspondence about the study should be addressed to the author at the Office of Program Evaluation and Research, California State Department of Education, 721 Capitol Mall--4th Floor, Sacramento, CA 95814, U.S.A.

Appendix A: Attitudes Toward Learning Disabilities Survey
M. M. Scheffelin, Ph.D., OPER, California State Department of Education, 1/82

In responding to these questions, please consider the events over the past year in the geographical territory covered by your CANHC-ACLD chapter.

As the International Year of Disabled Persons draws to a close,

1. Are the attitudes towards persons with learning disabilities more favorable in your community, for example:
   a) greater awareness of learning disability as a fact of life? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

b) more willingness to include the persons with learning disabilities in social, educational, athletic, arts activities? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

c) more acceptance as peers, equals, competitors? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

d) more willingness to considering hiring as paid workers? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

e) less resentment of apparent special treatment? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

2. Do persons with learning disabilities hold more favorable attitudes towards themselves?

a) more awareness of their own abilities? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

b) more self confidence? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

c) more knowledge of ways they can cope? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

d) more willingness to keep trying? competing? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

e) more pride in their own accomplishments? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

The theme of the International Year of Disabled Persons is "Toward Full Participation in the Life of the Community and Nation."

3. Have community activities in carrying out the theme contributed toward permanent, positive changes in attitudes toward learning disabilities...and persons with learning disabilities? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

4. What actions can be taken to build on the positive effects of community activities?

   a) newspaper, radio, TV coverage? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

   b) talks and demonstrations at community group meetings? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

c) one person talking with one other person at a time? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

d) formation of Young LD Adult groups? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

e) work with local schools? ...Yes ...No ...Not Sure

f) other ideas? (Please jot down)

5. Do you want a copy of the results of this survey? ...Yes ...No

6. If you have additional comments, please use the back of this form.

Please provide:

Your name:_____

Name of your CANHC-ACLD Chapter: _____

Best address, if you want a copy of the results:

_____

_____

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